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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7243
INFO RUEHPB/AMEMBASSY PORT MORESBY IMMEDIATE 1748
RUEHSV/AMEMBASSY SUVA IMMEDIATE 1360
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO IMMEDIATE 2650
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON IMMEDIATE 5033
RUEHBN/AMCONSUL MELBOURNE IMMEDIATE 4000
RUEHBD/AMCONSUL PERTH IMMEDIATE 2411
RUEHDN/AMCONSUL SYDNEY IMMEDIATE 2039
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CANBERRA 000472

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STATE FOR EAP/ANP

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SUBJECT: AUSTRALIAN READ-OUT OF PIF FOREIGN MINISTER'S
MEETING ON FIJI

REF: PORT MORESBY 100

Classified By: Political Counselor James Cole. Reasons 1.4(b)(d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Australia was very pleased with the outcome of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Foreign Minister's meeting on March 16. GOA officials strongly favor early elections in Fiji, and are examining modalities for making electoral preparations in the absence of a Parliament. They have some questions about how the PIF Joint Working Group will function, and do not want its meetings with Fijian authorities to be seen as providing international acceptance of the interim government. FM Downer has outlined broadly the kind of assistance Australia is prepared to offer to hasten the restoration of democracy, but the GOA has not yet drawn up any detailed proposals. End Summary.

Meeting and GOA Reaction

¶2. (C) Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) Fiji Task Force Director Peter Budd gave us a read-out on March 23 of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Foreign Minister's meeting on Fiji on March 16. Budd said that the outcome was the "best case scenario" for Australia: a firm endorsement of the Eminent Person's Group (EPG) recommendation by all parties. He said Australia was surprised by the robustness of the EPG report, although he recognized that the recommendations were fairly straightforward. He maintained that the communique was a good and necessary launching pad for the international community to use to apply further pressure to Fiji. He noted that it was particularly helpful to the EU in order to proceed with Article 96 consultations. Budd provided additional commentary on the meeting itself that tracked closely with ref tel information.

Legal Issues Related to the Need for Early Elections

¶3. (C) The GOA holds a strong view that the election should be held as early as possible, hopefully before the 24-month mark set by the EPG, according to Budd. It has sought internal legal counsel on how best to conduct activities deemed necessary for an election without a standing parliament, yet within Fiji's constitutional framework. DFAT's preliminary legal advice was that the neatest solution would be to use all of the existing structure (census, boundaries, etc.) for the first election and then modify those things once a new Parliament has been established. New Zealand's view was that the census and boundaries could be done legally, however, and still have an election completed

within 18 months. Budd said that the EU Representative had reminded participants that Mauritania had managed these types of activities and conducted an election in a short timeframe and with much less infrastructure in place than currently exists in Fiji.

Tasks for Suva Mission

14. (C) The GOA also was concerned about the structure and mechanisms of the working group established at the meeting. Budd said that Australia did not want the meetings of the working group and Fijian Interim Government (IG) officials to be used to portray international acceptance of the IG. DFAT has tasked their Suva Mission to talk to PIF Secretary Greg Urwin to determine how the working group will function. They will also ask Urwin to commission an independent, expert report on the timing and structure of elections in order to better understand the legal options.

Current Pressure Points

15. (C) Budd emphasized that the GOA thought that very little could be done at this point to further influence Bainimarama. Therefore, they are working on measures that will impact those around him. GOA sanctions remain in place and will continue until progress is evident. Until the military returns to the barracks and Bainimarama steps down as acting PM, Australia will not resume defence cooperation. All travel bans remain in place, and the GOA has added bans for those appointed by the IG. Budd said that Bainimarama had written to PM Howard and New Zealand PM Clark complaining that Australia had been encouraging others in the region to pressure Fiji and pointedly noting that the GOA action was

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"unappreciated".

16. (C) Budd expressed appreciation for helpful U.S. statements on Fiji. He also noted that cooperation from Seoul had been useful and thanked the United States for whatever it had done to encourage that outcome.

Australia Willing to Assist

17. (C) Budd said Australia was willing to offer assistance toward restoration of democracy if the Fiji military agreed to a credible road map. For example, as FM Downer told Parliament on March 21, Australia would be willing to help with the census, new electoral rolls and apportioning electoral boundaries through the work of an independent electoral commission. However, Budd said the GOA had not seen any evidence to back up current statements of progress from Fiji's IG, and the GOA has not yet fleshed out details of a specific proposal.

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